



NEWS

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NNSA Delays Modern Pit Facility Environmental Impact Statement and Selection of a Preferred Location

WASHINGTON, DC -- NNSA Administrator Linton Brooks has delayed the final environmental impact statement (EIS) for the Modern Pit Facility (MPF) in order to address congressional concerns that it is premature to pursue further decisions on a MPF at this time. The final EIS, which would guide Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham's decision about site selection of the MPF, was scheduled for publication by April 2004. The decision to delay the final EIS also delays identification of a preferred site for constructing the MPF.

“Restoring our capability to manufacture plutonium pits is an essential element of America's nuclear defense policy,” Brooks said. “While there is widespread support in Congress for this project, I believe we need to pause to respond to concerns that some committees have raised about its scope and timing.”

A pit, made of plutonium, triggers a nuclear explosion in all modern thermonuclear weapons. NNSA will have to manufacture replacement pits to help ensure the safety and reliability of existing warheads and maintain an infrastructure that is responsive to national security needs that may arise in the future. The nation's only pit manufacturing plant, Rocky Flats near Denver, Colorado, was shut down in 1989.

In June, NNSA published a draft EIS that evaluated five potential sites for the MPF: Los Alamos and Carlsbad, NM, the Nevada Test Site, the Pantex Plant in Amarillo, TX, and the Savannah River Site in Aiken, SC. The draft EIS also evaluated alternatives to construction of a new facility, including upgrading a plutonium fabrication facility at the Los Alamos National Laboratory and not constructing an MPF. The final EIS is expected to identify a preferred site for constructing an MPF.

The Administration requested \$23 million for conceptual design in FY 2004, but Congress provided only \$11 million, saying that committing to an MPF design and siting decision is “premature” until the makeup of the future stockpile is more clearly defined. Regardless of the stockpile size, the nation will ultimately require a pit manufacturing capability to address stockpile aging concerns.

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“We are taking a conservative, prudent course to develop a capability that will enable the nation to be ready for future contingencies without wasting tax dollars on excessive capacity,” Brooks said. “While Congress supports this project, some members clearly have questions about our timing and decision-making process; I intend to have further consultations with Congress before we proceed to a final EIS. In this regard, I have consulted with key officials in the Department of Defense, who have advised me that a temporary delay will not harm the safety or readiness of the current nuclear weapons stockpile. However, DoD is concerned about a significant delay in the MPF, since the availability of such a facility impacts the nuclear stockpile.”

This decision will in no way affect the W88 pit manufacturing and recertification program, currently underway at Los Alamos, which is reestablishing the technological base to manufacture pits and which thereby will inform many of the technology decisions which will be contained in the eventual MPF design.

NNSA is a semi-autonomous agency of the Department of Energy. It enhances U.S. national security through the military application of nuclear energy, maintains the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile, promotes international nuclear nonproliferation and safety, reduces global danger from weapons of mass destruction, provides the U.S. Navy with safe and effective nuclear propulsion, and oversees its national laboratories to maintain U.S. leadership in science and technology.

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